

Lillian Gish

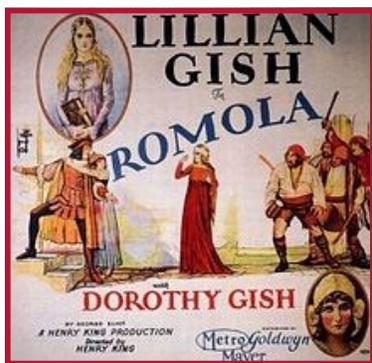
Long before she was presented with an honorary Academy Award for her contribution to the progression of motion pictures, recognized at the Kennedy Center Honors, or received The American Film Institute Life Achievement Award or gained a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, silent screen star Lillian Gish was a student at Ursuline Academy of St. Louis.



Starring in 106 movies from 1912 until 1987, Lillian was quite well-known when the 1935 edition of the *Oak Leaves* literary journal was published by our students. Here we share excerpts from the essay, "Childhood of a Famous Actress," by Peggy Williams Welsch '37:

"Lillian Gish is a very famous star, and as such she is naturally of great interest to us. In addition, she has an appealing personality that exerts its charm even over the radio, and her beauty is apparent even in newspaper pictures. But she has a stronger appeal than all this to us Ursuline girls, because she was at one time an Ursuline pupil, having been at school about a year with our sisters when the academy was on Twelfth and Russell Boulevard in Saint Louis.

Lillian Gish was born in Springfield, Ohio, in 1896. A year later her family removed to Dayton, Ohio, where her almost equally famous sister Dorothy was born. The father was an amiable, good-natured man but intemperate, and while the children were still quite young, Mrs. Gish was forced to separate from him and go to work to support herself and the two little girls. This necessity on her part led to the formation of one of America's leading actresses, for the children soon became members of a traveling troupe of actors and actresses."



"On the stage, Lillian played in several of the good old melodramas. Her roles were always pathetic ones, suited to her haunting, appealing personality...Her wistful face often helped to put some such show over, and probably saved more than one show from ruination.

When Lillian was almost fifteen, she was sent to Massillon, Ohio, for a long visit...After a few weeks in Massillon, she learned that her mother had opened a little confectionary in [East] Saint Louis. Lillian insisted on joining her mother, so that she might help her. Her mother, however, soon decided that it would be better all around if Lillian did not help in the confectionary, and that she should be in school. Poor Lillian had had only fragmentary experience of schools so far.

And thus it came about that Lillian Gish became a boarder in the Ursuline Academy at Saint Louis [in 1909-1910]. Here she found herself in surroundings altogether novel. At first she was unwilling to have either nuns or fellow boarders know that she had been on the stage. In fact, she was under the impression that the sisters would consider an actress, even a fifteen year old one, a very undesirable boarder and she had had all of the labels removed from her trunks before coming to the convent.



Lillian was not long in coming to love the convent and all it stood for. She reveled in the solitude, the shut-in-ness of the place. She became utterly devoted to the nuns, and was heard to say more than once that they were the most truly refined women she had ever met. Naturally spiritual, she was attracted by the convent routine, and more than once was heard to say that she would like to be a nun. Her teachers say she was always gracious

and pleasant to her companions, but her natural reserve kept her from being 'a good mixer.' She once asked her favorite sister to point out any faults she might be guilty of, saying: 'I want to eradicate any fault in me that might be an annoyance to others.' The sister declares that, after watching Lillian carefully for weeks, she was unable to find any fault in her. She was a perfect boarder.

Years later, when Lillian Gish played in 'The White Sister,' it was remarked by the critics that she must at some time have been intimately connected with nuns to be able to depict a religious so perfectly. She was very desirous of dedicating this play to her old teachers, but the management objected.

Lillian Gish stepped from the convent into young womanhood. When the end of the term came she returned to her mother, and it was not long after when she entered on her career as an actress on the screen..."

And the rest, as they say, is history—our Ursuline history.

An original autographed copy of the 1932 biography, Life and Lillian Gish, is available in the UA library and is inscribed with the message, "The story of one of your pupils, with gratitude and affection."

